

The First Half-Century of the Pennsylvania German Society

1890 - 1940

By ARTHUR D. GRAEFF

THERE is a saying on our dialect that runs "Was sich zewett, dritt sich", meaning that which happens twice will also happen a third time. In appearing before you in this role today, I am "drittend"; for I have been thus honored twice before: For the first time at the annual meeting of this Society held at Hershey in 1934 and again at Millersville in 1961. I ask the indulgence of the chair to permit an informal procedure here. May I ask for a show of hands of persons who attended the meeting at Hershey 31 years ago? (Answer - one). Now may I ask another show of hands of any who attended any meetings prior to 1934? (Answer - none). How many persons here were members before 1934? (Answer - three, including myself.)

If there are any members whose affiliations predate the above they will have known, personally, as I have known, some of the original founders of the Society and many of the illustrious persons who guided its destiny during the years of its infancy. On an occasion such as this memory crowds the senses and confusion may result unless there is a conscious effort to keep facts in place. In turn, such facts become the factors of any survey and assessment of the accomplishments of this Society on the eve of its Diamond Jubilee. By applying some of the techniques of historiography and intuitive perspective (if to the manner born) it is possible to arrive at generalizations which have the ring of truth and lessons for the future providing lamps to guide our feet for the next three-quarters of a century. My assignment is to review the first two quarters of this period while our more youthful incumbent president, Dr. Rosenberger, surveys the record of the more recent years of this span from 1890 to 1965.

The first consideration must deal with the factors which led a few men to visualize and promote the founding of the Society. There have been several efforts to do this. One theory is that the formation was merely one facet of the ground swell of interest in local and regional history in the eastern United States which marked the last two decades of the 19th Century. Many similar societies were organized during that period. A school of German historiographers had popularized the standardization of historical research and writing. Objectivity replaced mere pride; research began to outwit regurgitated tradition; secular writers began to take the places formerly entrusted only to clergymen who asked that we live by faith and the *more manu*, or dead hand, of legalistic approach to history gave way to seeking for functional values in the past, touched with the magic of romance to guide the present and plot the future. Thus history was on its way to becoming a science and the enlightened persons of the 1890's grasped this vision.

The term "Sleeping Giant" was a catchphrase used by the early founders of the Society — meaning, thereby, that a great mass of history was unexploited and awaited only the spark of a prestige society to unfetter the Prometheus.

Whatever the impulses — and they were varied — a group of men met in Lancaster in December 1890 in order to explore the possibilities of forming a Society. It is this observer's opinion that Frank R. Diffenderfer, one of the editors of the Lancaster *New Era* was the central force of the pioneer effort. His newspaper, supplemented by others in southeastern Pennsylvania tries to rouse the "Sleeping Giant." In early February of 1891 a second conference was held, in Lancaster, at which Dr. William H. Egle, then Pennsylvania State Librarian, was the chief consultant. Others present were all from Lancaster: Rev. J. Max Hark; Dr. John S. Stahr; Dr. R.K. Buehler; Dr. E.O. Lyte and Frank R. Diffenderfer. At a second conference held on February 26 at the home of J. Max Hark, plans were laid to call a Convention to be held at the Lancaster County Court House on April 15, 1891. A call was to be printed and circulated, copies of which are distributed here, today, as mementoes. The signatories to that Call were the representatives of the nine counties that attended the February 26 meeting at the home of the Rev. J. Max Hark.

As early as that date there was a disagreement about the terms Pennsylvania German and Pennsylvania Dutch but

the group decided that for purposes of the Call the term Pennsylvania German should be used — the final name to be set by the Convention itself. During these planning stages any student, reviewing the event must be impressed by the keen insight of Dr. Egle, the enthusiasm of Mr. Diffenderfer and the practical approaches advocated by the Rev. J. Max Hark. It is tempting to this observer to list the many names of prominent Pennsylvanians who joined the small coterie. Certainly no student of our history travels far without encountering such names as George F. Baer; Julius Sachse, E.H. Rauch; Theodore E. Schmauck; Lee Grumbine; Ezra Grumbine, Dr. A. R. Horne, H.L. Fisher, Col. Thomas Zimmerman, Dr. Paul Schweifeltz, Oswald Seidensticker and many others for whom there should be wreaths of valor on this our Diamond Day! But time forbids. History is the handmaiden of inexorable time and to us mortals only a fleeting glance is permitted.

Most profitable to the present is an examination of the problems which the fledgling society faced. It is not mere coincidence but a verity of human perversity that their problems have their counterparts today. A form of rugged individualism, sometimes called stubbornness, characterized the mental processes of the Teutonic mind of 7th generation Dutchmen at the turn of the Century just as it so often marks the deliberations of 10th generation descendants today. If you have 15 members on a Board of Directors you will have 16 opinions. Yet somehow the diversity resulting from perversity leads to ultimate unity of action and achievement. How could the Pennsylvania Germans, descended from the bands of malcontents of central Europe be other than controversial? Yet in a system of democracy even this inherent obstinacy can become an asset when the goals that are reached for transcend the individual wills of free men.

And so it was in the early controversies which confronted the leaders of the movement. At annual meetings, six times in succession, the Secretary's report averred that all was peaceful and calm among the members. This repetition leads to the suspicion "Methinks he doth protest too much."

The name by which we are designated is still a matter of debate — sometimes heated. Over the protests of E. H. Rauch, the dialect writer known as "Pi Schweffelbrenner", and others at that first meeting in Lancaster our present name was adopted.

While the response to the Call in April 1891 should have been gratifying to the sponsors the final results were far from satisfactory. One hundred and seventy five persons attended the first session in the Lancaster County Court House but only 83 members had joined prior to the second annual meeting held at Harrisburg in 1892. By 1893 there were 97 members elected but many of them had never paid any dues and attendance at the later meetings, 1893 at York, 1894 at Lebanon, 1895 at Reading, and the summer picnics at Mt. Gretna, brought attendance of only forty or less. By 1895 the elected membership stood at 207 but a large percentage was not in good standing.

Finances consumed much time during the business sessions at annual meetings. Dr. Julius Sachse was continued as treasurer of the Society through its early history but his reports were not recorded in detail at any time. At the time of the Reading Meeting, aged five years, the Society had a treasury amounting to a little more than \$200. With debts outstanding for the cost of publishing the first 4 volumes of the Society, Members were required to buy copies and did not receive them in lieu of dues as we do now.

At one of the early meetings, 1892 — a long protracted debate was held on the question of spending \$30. to circulate members and others on Dr. Marion D. Learned's proposal to prepare and publish a Pennsylvania German Dictionary. The debates became discursive, going so far as to claim that there were already enough glossaries in print and that the dialect would soon die anyway and therefore obviate the need for a dictionary. The decision was to allot the munificent sum of ten dollars to encourage Dr. Learned in his project.

When Captain Henry M. M. Richards of Reading, (later Lebanon) became a member

SEVENTY-THREE YEARS

The Pennsylvania German Society celebrated its 75th anniversary at the annual meeting held on October 23, 1965, at Franklin & Marshall College, Lancaster, Pa. On this occasion Dr. Arthur D. Graeff, President of the Pennsylvania German Folklore Society, read a paper, "The First Half-Century (1890-1940) of the Pennsylvania German Society. We are privileged to present Dr. Graeff's address in this issue of the ECK. For lack of space several paragraphs were deleted. — ED.

of the Executive Committee he introduced the concept of obituaries of deceased members and thus instituted the need for tracing family history to a German immigrant ancestor who came to Pennsylvania before the year 1808. This date was arbitrarily chosen because it was maintained that in 1808 the German philosopher Fichte infused a nationalistic spirit into the peoples of the German states and that, thereafter, immigrants came with a different set of ties and traditions, no longer the old patterns of the first settlers. With Captain Richard's leadership, also came emphasis on military history such as, mark the publications in the early 1900's.

The use of our dialect was a kind of academic football kicked about during sessions over the first 50 years. Some of the founders such as Rauch, Fisher, the Grumbines, A.R. Horne and others were acknowledged writers of dialect essays and poems. Others, usually men in civic leadership, were inclined to belittle its use. Frequently guest speakers at annual meetings went out of their way to joke about the dialect and either deplore its general use or their own lack of mastery of it. Henry Houck, Secretary of Internal Affairs was one of the staunch defenders of the dialect from 1900 to 1910. However, as new scholars joined the ranks — such men as Dr. Edwin Fogel and Dr. John Baer Stoudt who were versed in dialect and loved it — found themselves confronted by opposition from Captain Richards and others. The publications after 1912 have scant materials in dialect form even though the earlier ones are replete with it.

Prior to 1910 there was no such word as folklore. Persons pursuing such interests were called antiquarians but once the sights of the public were raised to the possibility of exploring, collecting and publishing the folkways of people the whole field of Pennsylvania German studies opened new vistas — new worlds — to conquer and many of the younger members seemed to feel that the Society should move in that direction. There was stiff resistance from the surviving members of the generation of founders and some bitter controversies developed in the early 1930's. These led to a schism in the ranks when in 1935 the Pennsylvania German Folklore Society was organized. In the minds of many who joined the new movement this was not a rebellion against the older Society — not a spite society, as some called it — but an adjunct to pursue a program along new lines. Except for a few persons, the early membership of the Folklore Society was made up of persons who held, and those living still hold, membership in both organizations.

The early 1930's also saw the development of many lasting achievements by this Society. In 1933 Dr. Emil Meynen, a great European scholar, addressed this Society and dedicated his great tome of bibliographical studies of Pennsylvania German Writings to us; in 1934 and 1935 came the publication of the 3 Volumes of Strassburger and Hinke — P.G. Pioneers — now scheduled to be reprinted. A few years later came the handsome collection of Illuminated Manuscripts by Henry S. Borneman, also his volume on Bookplates (1943).

By a curious shift of fate the Pennsylvania German Society became a publisher of folklore after 1925 and by 1940 the Pennsylvania German Folklore Society was a publishing genealogy, histories and biographies. More evidence of perversity. In a letter received from Dr. Preston A. Barba, just yesterday, the recipient of your citation for 1964, at Selinsgrove, regrets that he cannot be with us today. Then he adds, somewhat facetiously "What will be necessary 75 years hence will be research into the Pennsylvania German Psychology and why they prefer not to understand each other."